

IV. The Fulfillment of Sacred Space in Christ

After His resurrection, Jesus spent forty days on the earth prior to ascending to the Father. This forty-day period was yet another time of testing for Israel as Jesus presented Himself alive to numerous individuals, thereby compelling them to grapple with the profound implications of His death at Calvary. In essence, Christ's resurrection stood as the single great proof of the truth of all that He had said and done prior to His crucifixion; He was who He claimed to be and had accomplished the work He insisted He had come to do.

Jesus' words and works clearly testified to who He was and why He came into the world, and yet His self-interpretation was limited in both scope and content. His words and work were set within narrow boundaries so that, at the time of His ascension, relatively few in Israel – and none outside it – knew much about Him or had heard His words. He came and went quickly and with relatively little fanfare, but that was by divine design: The Father had determined that His Son's disciples would bear witness to Him and His work of redemption as far as the ends of the earth.

For the most part, Jesus' public self-interpretation was focused on the matter of *fulfillment*. That is, He explained Himself in terms of the Scriptures and their promise of a final, everlasting kingdom. Jesus' constant refrain was that Israel's failure to know Him reflected its failure to understand the Scriptures; at every turn, He answered His detractors and those who marveled at Him by directing them to what the Scriptures said and promised about the coming Messiah and the kingdom He would inaugurate (cf. Matthew 4:12-17, 5:17-20, 13:10-15, 21:1-46, 22:23-46; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:16-30; John 5:16-47, 7:14-42, 10:22-38, etc.).

Perhaps the most powerful and succinct instance of this line of argumentation was Jesus' encounter with two men on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection. As they walked along discussing the report of the empty tomb and what it might mean, Jesus came up alongside them and began engaging them. He answered their perplexity by referring them back to the Old Testament, taking them from the beginning through all the things in *all* the Scriptures concerning Himself (Luke 24:13-27). If these men were to "discern the times" and the One who stood beside them they would have to have their minds opened to understand the Scriptures (cf. 24:33-45).

The obvious implication is that it's impossible to know who and what Jesus is apart from knowing the Old Testament scriptures; so also one cannot know what has been realized in Him without knowing what God promised beforehand. Thus, while the four Gospel writers have their own specific orientation and start their accounts at different points, they all explicitly emphasize Jesus as the fulfillment of the Scriptures and all of its great kingdom themes (Luke arguably more broadly than the rest). In that regard, the first point of commonality they all share is their introduction of John the Baptist as the forerunner and herald of the in-breaking kingdom.

The New Testament everywhere presents Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures – the promised Seed of the woman and Abraham and royal Son of David in connection with whom Yahweh would usher in His everlasting kingdom. From the vantage point of the Old Testament, the inseparability of biblical messianism and kingdom revelation is due to the fact that the kingdom promised in the Scriptures is a *redemptive* kingdom.

- At the time of the Fall, God promised a day in which the serpent (and, by implication, his works and the curse brought about through his deception) would be overthrown and destroyed by a “seed” to come from Eve. The doctrine of the kingdom flows out of this primal promise and its historical development and speaks to the promise’s fulfillment. In the Scriptures the “kingdom of God” doesn’t refer to God’s supreme lordship as such, but to His work of restoration in fulfillment of His oath in Genesis 3:15. It is for this reason that it is a redemptive kingdom; it is the outcome of God’s sovereign activity in recovering the estranged creation to Himself through judgment, deliverance, and renewal.
- These core features of the kingdom were manifest in the Israelite theocracy. The kingdom of Israel was born out of a great work of redemption in which Yahweh judged the serpent’s seed (expressed in Pharaoh and Egypt) and thereby delivered the seed of Abraham (the woman’s seed). From that time forward, every point in Israel’s development and historical life reinforced the fact that it was a redemptive kingdom.
- So also the decline and downfall of the Israelite theocracy were accompanied by the divine promise of redemptive restoration. As He had done in the Exodus, Yahweh would again deliver His people from their subjugation and restore them to Himself by judging and destroying the enemies who had taken them captive (ref. Isaiah 50:1-52:12). In this way the Lord would again bring comfort to His people, and He appointed a forerunner as the sign and herald of that comfort.

A. The Imminent Kingdom – John the Baptist

1. The Isaianic Forerunner

As noted, all four of the gospel writers record John’s ministry and, most importantly, *do so conscious of the fact that he was the fulfillment of Isaiah’s promise of a forerunner* (cf. Matthew 3:1-3; Mark 1:1-4; Luke 3:1-6; John 1:19-23). The significance of this is not so much what it says about John himself as what it reveals about the One he prepared for and announced. A closer look at the forerunner context in Isaiah makes the point.

This context introduces the latter section of Isaiah in which the prophet progressively reveals Yahweh’s Servant in whom He would fulfill His promise of restoration. This promise had a near-term referent in the recovery of the Judean remnant from Babylonian captivity, but extended beyond it to the renewal of the entire cosmos.

The Persian king Cyrus was to fulfill the role of Yahweh’s “servant” with respect to the former restoration; he would release the exiles and authorize them to return to Judah and rebuild Jerusalem and its temple (44:24-28). In this way he would serve as a prototypical *messiah* (“anointed one” – ref. 45:1). But in chapter 48, Cyrus as Yahweh’s anointed servant-deliverer (ref. 48:12-15) is supplanted in the prophecy by another such individual who is notably characterized by the attendance of Yahweh’s Spirit (48:16). This servant figure is then introduced in chapter 49 as Yahweh’s true *Israel* in whom He would save a remnant of Israel and Judah along with the nations of the earth (49:1-6).

This global salvation was to be effected through the Servant's work of vicarious atonement (53:1-12) and, as a result of it, Zion (symbolizing Yahweh's covenant wife who bears children for him – ref. 50:1; also Hosea 2:1-23) would be restored from her desolation. In her restoration she would then gather in the innumerable “children” of the covenant Lord secured for Him by the atoning work of His Servant (54:1-17).

The focal point of the Servant's work in Isaiah's prophecy is the recovery to God of estranged mankind. But, in keeping with the fact that the curse extended to the whole creation, Isaiah showed that work of recovery to reach beyond man to embrace the entire created order. Through His Servant, Yahweh would vanquish the curse and usher in a *new creation* (cf. 65:1-25, 66:5-24 with 11:1-10).

- a. Thus Yahweh's message through Isaiah was one of *comfort*. Desolation and destruction had been decreed, but that wasn't to be the last word: Judgment and wrath would one day yield to renewal and recovery when the Lord rose up on behalf of His estranged creation to deliver it from its bondage and restore it to Himself. This message and the proclamation of its impending fulfillment had been entrusted to the forerunner – now present in John – and he was to prepare the sons of Israel to receive the Servant coming to accomplish that work (40:1-11).
- b. As the Isaianic forerunner, John's mission was one of preparation; the Lord raised him up to prepare the people of Israel for the coming of their Messiah and the inauguration of His kingdom. He was to “make smooth in the desert a highway for Israel's God,” and there were two components of his preparatory work, both of which focused on the matter of *repentance*.

The first was John's **baptism**, which the Scripture calls a “baptism of repentance” (cf. Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; also Acts 13:23-24); John called the sons of Israel to undergo this ritual washing in connection with the confession of their sins (Matthew 3:6; Mark 1:5). Some have wrongly concluded that John's baptism itself secured the forgiveness of sins, but it actually symbolized the purification from uncleanness that was the goal of a person's repentance. It wasn't a baptism *unto* repentance and forgiveness, but a baptism *because* of the repentance that brings forgiveness of sin. For this reason it was universal in scope (Luke 3:14), though it primarily targeted the unfaithful house of Israel. All men were in need of repentance, even as the forerunner was appointed to announce Yahweh's salvation that would extend to the ends of the earth (John 1:29).

An even worse conclusion is that John was preparing the people for the coming of the messianic kingdom by calling them away from their bad behavior. Luke's account especially has been used to support this understanding (ref. 3:10-14). But a closer examination shows that John was revealing to the multitudes that the emerging kingdom calls for an entirely new way of thinking about and approaching life. The kingdom of God, soon to be inaugurated in the messianic Servant, is an otherworldly kingdom that operates according to a radically different set of principles. It is a *heavenly* kingdom rather than an earthly one.

This is the reason that the matter of repentance was the marrow of John's preparatory work. Repentance speaks of a change in one's *thinking*, and if the sons of Israel (and the Gentiles among them) were going to be able to correctly perceive and thereby embrace the King and His kingdom when they arrived, their natural and historical way of conceiving those promised realities would have to be drastically altered. In effect, Israel would have to become a new Israel. S. McKnight, in the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, comments: "*While John may have baptized in the Jordan simply because it was close to the desert, it is far more likely that he did so to evoke the ancient Jewish tradition of entry into the land as the new people of God. Having been baptized in the Jordan, the people came out of the water, re-entered the land and sought once again to take it for God as the now pure Israel.*"

John's second preparatory work was his **proclamation** of the kingdom and its king, and that proclamation reinforces the sort of repentance he sought. For at the heart of John's proclamation was his rebuke of Israel's unfounded confidence before God. He warned those who came out to him about finding their righteousness in their Abrahamic descent and place in the covenant household. The Jews' ethnic pride lulled them into thinking that they enjoyed a special standing with God, while their natural self-righteousness fostered the notion that righteousness under the law was achieved by external, "legal" conformity to it. If they were to recognize and receive their Messiah and enter His kingdom they would need to repent of all such thinking (cf. Matthew 3:7-12; Luke 3:7-9).

2. The Coming Elijah

John's role as Isaiah's forerunner is further elucidated by his being the *Elijah* promised by Malachi (4:5-6; cf. Matthew 11:7-14, 17:1-13). John's appearance mirrored Elijah's, but the real issue was his coming in the spirit and power of Elijah. As the forerunner, John was to prepare a smooth pathway for the Lord's entrance, but he would do so by turning the hearts of the father to the children and the hearts of the children to the fathers (Luke 1:5-17). Like Elijah before him, John emerged as Yahweh's prophet at a time when Israel was at a critical point of decision. Each indicted the covenant people for their rebellious unbelief and each called them to repent and return to their God. In Elijah's case this meant renouncing Baal; in John's it meant embracing Yahweh in His Son.

Israel's repentance would prepare them to receive their Messiah, but it also represented the reuniting of their hearts with their fathers. The meaning becomes clear when it is recognized that the text is referring to the *patriarchal* fathers. The people of Israel were the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to whom the kingdom promise first came, and the Israelite nation was the first realization of that promise. But the children had turned away from their fathers by rejecting the patriarchs' God and covenant. Now the time had come for Yahweh to inaugurate the true kingdom promised to the fathers – the kingdom they had seen by faith and longed for up until the day of their death (Hebrews 11:8-16). Only by repentance – by rethinking what it means to be sons of the kingdom – would the children of the patriarchs be reunited with them and prepared for Abraham's Seed.